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Pesach – A Holiday of Questions.

About the **Haggadah** Commentary of Rabbi Isaak **Abravanel**

Why does the Haggadah begin in Aramaic ?
Why is the Matzah called bread of the poor people ?
Why is the sentence „Next year year free people“ in Hebrew?
What does the name "Pharao" mean in Hebrew?
What is the meaning of the country name „Mizrajim“?



"What have we gained from the Exodus of Egypt, if we are in exile again?" asked Abravanel ca. 500 years ago.
What is the meaning of the name of the LORD „HaMakom“?
What does the sentence stand for „In the beginning our fathers were idolaters...“?
How is the content of the Haggadah structured?
What does it mean that Israel was there (in Egypt) „Mezujanim“?

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אלעזר ארי ליפניסקי

מאמר: פסח חג של קושיות - על פירוש דון יצחק אברבנאל להגדה של פסח

Pesach - A Holiday of Questions

About the Haggadah-Commentary of
Rabbi Don Isaak Abravanel (1437-1508)¹

Article by Elazar Ari Lipinski (New and
extended version based on a previous

Ari Lipinski article from Pesach 5769)

The events of the Exodus from Egypt of the children of Israel ca. 3300 years ago present a model example for the human pursuit for liberty. This story remained relevant ever since. The idea of liberty touches us equally when it relates to a complete nation or when it refers only to a single person. We feel being personally addressed either way.



On the **Seder Evening**, in which we celebrate the Exodus from Egypt, we place an additional chair around the festive table which stands symbolically for those Jews who are still not free in some countries in the world. For decades this symbolic empty chair referred to the Jews in the former Soviet Union. Today already over 1 Million of these Jews are in Israel. Wasn't this mass emigration of the Soviet Jews a modern Exodus? Soon the Jewish people will celebrate the **Pesach Holiday**, the holiday of liberty. Therefore on this occasion we read the **Haggadah** (Pesach Story) with the Hebrew commentaries of Rabbi Don Isaak Abravanel. Abravanel experienced personally a number of expulsions. Nevertheless he never lost hope that his people will be free and will experience deliverance. His commentary of the Pesach Haggadah illustrates his strong messianologic conviction.

Don Isaac Abravanel was born in Lisbon in 1437. Searching back the origins of his family tree he traced his roots with King David. According to his studies his ancestors had left Jerusalem after the destruction of the Temple and reached Spain.

Abravanel grew up on the Iberian Half Island. He intensively and comprehensively studied the Bible and became the chief Rabbi of Portugal. At the same time he became the Finance Minister of the Portuguese king. In 1471 King Alfons conquered the city of Arzilla in Morocco and took many prisoners. Among them were 250 Jews. Abravanel organized a nation wide fundraising among Jewish communities in order to set free these Jewish POWs. He donated himself a fortune from his own property so that these Jews could live two years in Portugal until they learned the language and found a job. Later on Abravanel suffered under the persecutions of the Jews and had to flee to Toledo in Spain. There King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella appointed him in the year 1484 as their Finance Minister for the Kingdom of Castilia and Aragon. Already 8 years later, in 1492, he experienced himself with his family the notorious expulsion of all Jews from Spain. Even his offer to pay an enormous ransom was rejected by the Catholic regime. So once again expropriated he had to emigrate leading a large number of Jews from Spain to Italy. In Naples he became in 1494 again a finance consultant to the local king. But in 1503 he was forced to leave for Venice totally poor. He again served there as a finance consultant to the Serenissima. Abravanel died in Venice in 1508 and was buried in Padua. One year later the Jewish cemetery there was completely destroyed in war actions. His grave is untraceable.



Abravanel's written heritage is not composed of economic and financial treatises. He left us monumental and most valuable Torah commentaries and philosophical books which deal with essential topics of religious belief such as the Creation of the Universe or the resurrection of the dead. His personal intensive political experience at the court of a number of kingdoms increased his distrust towards monarchies and politics in general. His interpretational comments to Genesis chapters 4 and 9 illustrate it. In his comments to the book of Exodus and to book Samuel I chapter 8 he well understood how the prophet had interpreted the request of the Israelites to get a King as a rebellion against the Kingdom of God. Abravanel preferred a republican constitution and described the ancient Israelite Theocracy according to the model of the constitution of Venice.



Abravanel's unique method of Bible commentary is characterized by him posing an extensive sets of questions relating to a topical section. A further specialty of his Bible commentaries are his detailed introductions to each book, in which he summarized the essentials of the book. His methods were unconventional for the Middle Ages. He applied them also in his explanations of the Pesach Haggadah. He formulated to the Haggadah 100 questions!

Special to them is that he called them "gates". His concept: the gate to knowledge is a question! Doing so it is no wonder that Abravanel is considered as one of the leading philosophers of his time. Like Socrates he formulated questions. His questions followed the purpose of the Four "Kushiyot" (Questions) posed by the youngest participant of the Seder Evening: They look for the unique character of the Seder Evening. The special meals and sitting order are designed by the Halachah (valid Jewish guideline) to raise questions among the children, so that they will expect explanations.

Since we will not translate all 100 Abravanel questions in this frame work, we will focus on a few in order to be able to also provide Abravanel's answers to them.

Question: Why does the Haggadah text begin in the Aramaic language?

Abravanel: The ordinary people of Israel, the women and mainly all the children who could hardly speak or understand Hebrew at the Mishna time, when the Pesach Haggadah (Pesach Story) was composed, should understand the content. So it was in Aramaic, the spoken language at that time. Since the beginning of the Haggadah is an invitation to come and join the meal it was important to make sure that the poor people would understand the offer.

Q: Why was the Matzah named as the "bread of the poor people" (Lachma anya)? In the Seder Evening it is obligatory to say loudly at least the words: "Pesach, Matzah, Maror". Actually the Matzah should remind more of the redemption than of the poverty of the time of the enslavement.



A: Because the Matzah is an unleavened bread it is very thin. So it symbolizes deprivation and the humiliation of slavery. Abravanel named a further reason: The Matzah takes long to digest. So the Matzah suits well poor people as a meal providing a long standing feeling of been fed.

Q: Why then is the sentence "Le Shana Haba' bnei chorin" (Next year free people) formulated in Hebrew and not in Aramaic?

A: The reason for the Hebrew formulation was that foreign nations under which the Israelites lived should not understand it and therefore might suspect the intention of a Jewish rebellion.

Q: What does the name of the Egyptian King "Pharaoh" mean in Hebrew?

A: The word Pharaoh sounds in Hebrew like "Pe ra" meaning an evil mouth.

Q: What is the meaning of the Hebrew country name for Egypt, which is Mitzraim?

A: In Hebrew the country name Mitzraim is spelled and sounds similar to the Hebrew word "Metzarim" which means a bottleneck or a narrow and pressing path.

Q: Abravanel asked: "What had we gained from the Exodus from Egypt and the related redemption if we (he and his Jewish contemporaries) are now again in exile?"

A: First of all the gain was the impact that the nations of the world recognized the supremacy of God and were informed that God chose Israel as his people. Secondly Israel inherited the land of Israel and spent there over 1,300 years. Thirdly and importantly the people of Israel received the Torah after the Exodus from Egypt on the way to Israel. Since then the "Shechina" and the "Hashgacha" reside with the people of Israel. So despite that the Jews are in the Diaspora they can learn the Torah and learn about the miracles God did. This fills the Jews, so Abravanel, with the hope for the redemption to come.

Q: Where from does the name of God, "HaMakom" come? See the blessing: „Baruch HaMakom“.

A.: „HaMakom“ means „The Place“. Already Chazal (the ancient leading wise men) used to describe with this name that God was comprehensive and omnipresent **everywhere**. The name „HaMakom“ points at the ubiquity of God, in heaven and on earth, in the higher Spheres and beyond. So this way the blessing

can be understood „Baruch Hamakom“, i.e. Blessing / blessed is the exalted Place, which is beyond our perception.

Q: What for does the phrase stand: „MiTchila Ovdei Avoda Zara Hyju Avotenu VeAchshaw Kervanu HaMakom LeAvodato“ (In the beginning our fathers were idolaters, but now HaMakom brought us nearer to him, so we can serve him.)

A: This statement reflects the structure of the whole Haggadah: At first rejection, then finally worship. For this purpose Abraham is given as an example: At first Abraham did not possess the land, nor had he the complete faith neither did he have a promised son. But at the end he was given all of it.



Following are a few more important explanations of Abravanel to the Haggadah. His extraordinary ability to serve as a comforter to his people Abravanel proves in his interpretation relating to the exile. He contradicted other scholars who tried to see the Egyptian exile as a punishment for the sins committed by the sons of Jakob. Abravanel emphasized that the Egyptian exile was an implication of the treatment of Josef by his brothers but not a punishment. Therein the Egyptian exile was different from the Babylonian and from the Roman Exile. The blessing „Baruch Schomer Havtachtu LelIsrael“ (Blessed is the keeper of his promise to Israel) in the Haggadah is also valid independently from the sins of the Israelites, because God will fulfill his promises in any case. From this one can imply that since God kept his promise and liberated the Israelites from Egypt despite their sins, he will do so also in future and keep his promise to the Children of Israel and will liberate us too. This was an important message to his contemporaries many of whom experienced the expulsion from Spain. Their fate should not be wrongly interpreted as if they were themselves to be blamed for the crimes done to them as if it was a punishment. Abravanel wanted to release his fellow Jews from an unnecessary guilt complex. The criminal behaviour of the Pharaohs, Torquemadas and Hitlers must not be blamed on the Jews who were the victims! The crimes of others must not be misunderstood as if they resulted from a wrongdoing on the Jewish side.

In the Haggadah it says: „ScheHaju Israel Metzuyanin Scham“, that Israel was distinguished in Egypt.

Abarbanell indicates that the word "metzuyanin" here can be interpreted not only as 'distinguished' (meaning excellent). „Mezuyanin“ can be derived from another root

meaning "marked". Abravanel supports his view referring to the fact that the Israelites kept their Hebrew language, which one can prove by the personal names, the clothing and the religion they preserved. These marked qualities distinguished the Israelites from the Egyptians. The fact that the Children of Israel preserved their identity was crucial for their later liberation from the slavery in Egypt.

In his interpretation of the Haggadah Abravanel emphasizes that God himself rescued the people of Israel from Egypt, not a mediator or a messenger, not even an angel. God speaks explicitly in first person language: „VeAarti“ (and I went through)- „Ani veLo Malach“ (I and not an angel), „Ani VeLo Saraf“ (I and not a Seraph). We learn that we own our liberty directly to God and to no one else. The Haggadah teaches us that if God did not rescue our fathers from Egypt then, we would be still enslaved their today. Therefore everyone should personally be grateful to God for his liberty and thank God for that especially on the Pesach Holiday.

For the upcoming Pesach holiday which is also called *Chag Ha-Cherut* (The Holiday of Liberty), *Chag HaGe'ula* (The Holiday of Redemption), we wish us and all the Children of Israel to be liberated from physical and from mental chains, so that we can devote ourselves like Abravanel to the many questions of history and of the present time. Abravanel can serve us as a model of a person who never gave up hope even during tough times. We wish you Chag Sameach! A Happy Pessach Holiday!

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Footnotes:

1. **Zewach Pesach**, Commentary of the Haggadah of Pesach, (Constantinople 1505), Ozar Peru-shim veZiyurim shel Haggadah Shel Pesach, Or HaKodesh (Publisher), Jerusalem, 2005.
2. Among Abravanel's philosophical Books are: **Mifalot Elokim**, Studies about the Creation of the univers (Venice 1592); **Rosh Amana**, About the Dogmas (Amsterdam 1505); **Abravanel's Commentary to Maimonides' More Nevuchim**, which was first published in 1881 in Prag.
3. Dr. Shaul Regev, **The Interpretations Method of Abravanel**, Mchanaim Nr. 4, 1993.

About the author: **Ari Lipinski**, born in Israel, Business Administration & Bible at the Bar-Ilan-University and achieved his MBA at the University of Hertfordshire near London. He was a couple of times the envoy in Germany of Israeli organisations like the KKL, the Bar Ilan University and the Jewish Agency). Ari Lipinski is author of a number of publications about Israel and lectures in Germany and in Israel to many German and US audiences about special Hebrew Bible commentaries and about Israel's security.

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